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ABSTRACT

Departmental differences in student perceptions of teaching effectiveness were measured using behaviorally anchored rating scales (BARS). The 495 college students were taking junior and senior level courses in art, business, computer science, French, psychology, and sociology. Each subject completed either the BARS or a simple summated scale, both of which contained the same dimensions, and students were asked to give ratings for the teacher that they would consider ideal for the course. Art majors rated the ideal teacher lower on fairness than did psychology or computer science majors. Art students differed most from psychology students on the grading accuracy dimension. On the dimension of knowledge and preparation, sociology majors rated the ideal teacher much lower than did computer science majors. The group differences appear to have some practical value for aiding in the interpretation of student evaluations of teaching. The subjective nature of fine arts would lead art majors to be suspect of attempts by teachers to grade them accurately and without bias. On the other hand, psychology deals so extensively with topics of testing and bias, and since psychology and computer science are involved with statistical methods, students in those areas would be likely to expect more accurate and fair grading practices from their teachers. Since the field of sociology is so broad, sociology students may not expect the teacher to have a very thorough knowledge of any particular topics in that area. However, computer science students may wish the teacher to be well prepared to answer specific questions related to study assignments. The problem of comparing instructors across departments, and implications for tenure decisions are noted. (SW)

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DEPARTMENTAL DIFFERENCES IN STUDENT
PERCEPTIONS OF 'IDEAL' TEACHING

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Departmental differences in student
perceptions of 'ideal' teaching.

Among the sources of information on teacher effectiveness are systematic ratings made by students. Systematic student evaluations are usually paper and pencil measures called teacher evaluation scales, and consist of items related to specific characteristics which are thought to be essential to effective teaching. Most teacher evaluation scales include questions relating to the instructor's overall teaching effectiveness, the course's value as a whole, and its effect on the student.

The reliability and validity of student ratings have been a source of discontent for faculty awaiting tenure decisions; however, research and practice have their continued utilization for administrative purposes (Gustad, 1961; Guthrie, 1949; McKeachie, 1969; Rippey, 1975; Stecklein, 1960). Comparisons of several studies which examined teaching dimensions considered important by students showed that there is generally consistent agreement regarding what constitutes effective teaching (Heien & Moody, 1974; Miller, 1972). Differences have been reported though, among the rank ordering of these dimensions in order of their importance as a function

of academic area.

An early study conducted by H.H. Remmers (1929) which analyzed data obtained for a large sample of teachers across a variety of departments suggested that departmental differences as well as individual instructor patterns of teaching personality exist, and that interdepartmental variations are quite extreme. This would indicate that considerable differences in teaching effectiveness exist. These findings were supported by studies conducted by Gadzella (1968), Lewis (1968), and Krumbein (1975). Linsky and Straus (1973) and Pohlmann (1976) analyzed student ratings in terms of overall teaching effectiveness, while language and humanities teachers received the highest ratings. Considering the importance that administrators place on student ratings, it is imperative that institutions should allow for discipline differences in the interpretation of student ratings by comparing faculty members only with their discipline peers, or by developing discipline specific rating instruments. Research in this area has been based upon the rating scales developed by individual departments, and presents a problem in standardization. The performance rating scales used in academia have typically been poorly and randomly constructed, lending themselves to ambiguity when interpreted by students. Traditional rating scales

have also been found to have problems with rating error associated with them, so that students may be unintentionally providing less accurate measures of actual teacher performance.

The present study sought to measure departmental differences in student perceptions of teaching effectiveness using carefully developed rating instruments. The Smith-Kendall (1963) procedure was used to develop behaviorally anchored rating scales (BARS), which have been shown to reduce rater errors such as halo, leniency, and central tendency. The scales are believed to encourage more conscientious ratings by students because they are directly involved in the scale construction, and the behavioral rather than numerical anchors should make objective ratings more accurate. If similar departmental differences are found using BARS, these differences may be more pronounced than those found using other rating methods.

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 495 undergraduate coeds at a large university in upstate New York enrolled in junior and senior level Art, Business, Computer Science, French, Psychology, and Sociology courses. All subjects participated voluntarily and with the knowledge that they could withdraw their participation at any time.

Procedure. A behaviorally anchored rating scale and a simple summated rating scale were developed in an

earlier study. The parallel forms were distributed to upper level undergraduates in a sample of Art, Business, Computer Science, French, Psychology, and Sociology courses. Each subject completed either a behaviorally anchored rating scale or a simple summated scale. Both forms contained the same dimensions to be rated on a ten-point response scale, and students were asked to give ratings for the teacher that they would consider 'ideal' for the course.

Results

One-way analyses of variance were performed for each of the eight teaching dimensions for each of the rating formats. A posteriori contrasts were made using the Scheffe S test for its suitability for comparisons of groups with unequal n's, and for its conservative nature. Significant differences were found on three of the dimensions. All differences were results of ratings made using the simple summated scales. No significant differences were found between groups using the BARS.

Art majors rated the ideal teacher lower on Fairness (7.8) than did Psychology or Computer Science majors (9.28). Art students differed most from Psychology students on the Grading Accuracy dimension, with ratings of 8.27 and 9.59, respectively. On the dimension Knowledge and Preparation, Sociology majors rated the ideal teacher much lower than Computer Science majors (8.94 and 9.55, respectively).

Significance levels for a posteriori comparisons were $p .05$.

Discussion

The stringent Scheffe S test was selected to ensure that differences found would have practical as well as statistical significance. The low level of Fairness that Art students indicated would be satisfactory for the ideal teacher indicates that fairness is a less important quality for an art teacher than for the computer science or psychology teacher. On the dimension Grading Accuracy, Art differed significantly from Psychology, indicating that the art students consider the ideal teacher to grade less accurately than do psychology students. For the dimension Knowledge and Preparation, sociology majors expected their teachers to be less knowledgeable than computer science instructors, and they expected them to be less well prepared. These group differences appear to have some practical value for aiding in the interpretation of student evaluations of teaching. The subjective nature of fine arts would lead art majors to be suspect of attempts by teachers to grade them accurately and without bias. On the other hand, Psychology deals so extensively with the topic of testing and bias, and since psychology and computer science are involved with statistical methods, students in those areas would be likely to expect more accurate and fair grading practices from their teachers.

Again, the nature of the majors which differ significantly on Knowledge and Preparation seems logical. Sociology majors may not want a teacher who will be consistently well prepared so that they would have opportunities to discuss special issues. Since the field of sociology is so broad, students in that area may not expect the teacher to have a very thorough knowledge of any particular topic in that area. On the other hand, Computer Science represents a relatively finite set of information, and assignments are given regularly so that the teacher would have to be well prepared to answer specific questions related to the work assigned.

These findings support the hypothesis that there are departmental differences in students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness as a function of academic area. Interpretations of student ratings should include an understanding of these departmental differences, and emphasize the problem of comparing instructors across departments. This is especially important for administrators making tenure decisions, and for teachers who use rating results as feedback to improve their teaching skills.

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